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Claire Le Foll

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The Jews of Belorussia in Western and Russian Historiography

The study of a country before the affirmation of nationalistic feeling or the emergence of a nation-state infallibly presents the researcher with the problem of its name and its geographical boundaries. The historian's use of terms and concepts deriving from debate and conceptual tools of the time may appear to be out of place and be viewed as anachronistic.

In the case of Belorussia, the problem is complicated by a history of multiple border changes, its rule by several empires, and the stifling of Belorussian culture as a result of Russification and Polanization policies. This State, located between Russia and Poland on the one hand and between the Baltic States and the Ukraine on the other, became independent in 1991 and took the name of the Republic of Belarus. However the emergence of the Belorussian nation-state can be traced back to 1921, when the Soviet Socialist Republic of Belorussia (BSSR) was founded within the Soviet Union. Before the founding of this state, however, which was the outcome of a nationalistic movement that arose at the end of the nineteenth century and strengthened after the Russian Revolution of 1905, Belorussia had been part of the Russian Empire since the first partition of Poland in 1772. Before that it was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which itself had belonged to the Kingdom of Poland in 1569 (Treaty of Lublin)[1] Modern-day Belorussia corresponded, in the days of the Grand Duchy, to one region of this vast land which extended in its heyday from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. In the Russian Empire, from 1772 to 1914, it was connected to the northwestern provinces, which the Russian administration subdivided into the Lithuanian provinces (Grodno, Vilna and Kovno) and the Belorussian provinces (Minsk, Mogilev and Vitebsk). The name Belorussia or *Belorousski* used by the Russian authorities thus referred to a region of the empire, just as the term '*malorousski*' (little Russia) was used to refer to Ukrainians. Played up or played down as a function of the policy of Russification or the struggle against Polanization, the term was thus not connected to the recognition of any kind of national specificity.

The historian focusing on 19th century Belorussia is faced with the problem of the territorialization of the subject at hand. There are several options available: use the modern-day borders of Belorussia, which do not coincide with the borders of the Russian provinces and only vaguely match the so- called Belorussian provinces (Minsk, Mogilev Vitebsk) plus part of the Lithuanian provinces; use the borders of that era and restrict the study to a few northwestern provinces or all of these provinces (Lithuanian and Belorussian) as Belorussian historians tend to do. Lastly, the historian can define his or her own borders on the basis of linguistic,

[1] For a history of the Grand Duchy, see Lalkou, *Aperçu de l'histoire politique du Grand-Duché de Lithuanie*, Paris, L'Harmattan, Collection Biélorussie, 2000, 125 p.

ethnographic or historical criteria to delineate a personal, "ethnic" Belorussia. In any case, as we shall see, it is rare to find historians of Belorussia who have provided explicit justifications of their conceptualization of this country. The historian must also decide whether or not to use the word Belorussia or select a name more in line with the period (White Russia, Northwestern provinces.)[2]

In addition to these general issues concerning Belorussia, other problems specific to the history of Jews in Eastern Europe must be dealt with. Traditionally, Belorussia in the historiography of Russian Jewry was connected to *Litvakia* (*Lite* in Yiddish); i.e. a region which encompassed the Baltic countries and modern day Belorussia and which is generally known as Lithuania. This 'Jewish Lithuania' is customarily differentiated from, or contrasted with, two other regions of Eastern Europe: the south (the Ukraine) and Poland. The linguistic factor is decisive in differentiating these zones: Lithuanian Yiddish is different from both Polish and Ukrainian Yiddish in terms of pronunciation, idiomatic expressions and its loan-words borrowed from local languages (Lithuanian and Belorussian). Within these three cultural regions, subgroups such as Belorusssia, Galicia or Bukovina stand out in terms of their dialects, folklore and history. These regional entities have attracted little attention in the historiography of Eastern European Jewry. Historians have preferred presenting this Jewish population as a homogeneous, indivisible whole which underwent a common history marked by the legislation and the discrimination they were subjected to in the Polish-Lithuanian and then the Russian empires, the harsh living conditions in the Russian Pale of Settlement[3], the religious strife, the emergence of an intelligentsia and gradual involvement in political movements in response to anti-Semitism. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of several former Soviet republics, national historiographies have made their appearance. The Jews of the Ukraine, Moldavia, Poland, Lithuania and many other regions of the Ashkenazi sphere have become the topic of specialized research. In Belorussia as well, historians have become interested in the culture and history of the Jews in their country. A conference in 1994 paved the way for research on the Jewish culture of Belorussia and its interactions with the Belorussian and other cultures. Other efforts followed which attempted to revitalize or describe this past buried since the Soviet era.[4] However, researchers tend not to explain their conceptualization of nineteenth-century Belorussia and their reasons for differentiating the Jews of Belorussia from Russian Jews. It is obvious from their point of view that since Belorussia claims to have its own past and culture that

[2] In French, the Russian word *Beloroussia* can be translated in several ways: Biélorussie, Russie blanche or Ruthénie blanche. Compare with English: White Russia. See on this topic: Symaniec, Virginie, Goujon, Alexandra, *Parlons biélorussien. Langue et culture*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997, pp.21-24.

[3] Pale of Settlement: The western provinces of the Russian Empire (approximately modern-day Lithuania, Belorussia, Moldavia and the Ukraine) outside of which Jews were prohibited from living or working, (with a few exceptions), from the end of the eighteenth century to 1917, the date of the emancipation of the Jews.

[4] For greater detail, see Le Foll, Claire, La renaissance de l'historiographie juive en Biélorussie : entre histoire et mémoire, *Chroniques sur la Biélorussie contemporaine*, collective work edited by Goujon A., Lallemand J.-C. and Symaniec V., L'Harmattan, coll. Biélorussie, 2001, pp.39-48.

differs from Russian, Polish and Lithuanian history, the history of Belorussian Jewry should do likewise. They simply state that the Jews of Belorussia have their own history and situate their research within the limits of modern- day Belorussia. Between the birth in the nineteenth century of the historiography of Eastern European Jewry and this deliberate and arbitrary inclusion of the history of the Jews within a national Belorussian framework, three groups and two periods can be defined: the foundations, laid by the first generation of Jewish Russian historians; a second generation of Jewish historians writing for the most part in Yiddish in Soviet history journals, and finally Western historians (Americans, Israelis or French). What were the stages in between? How did non-Belorussian historians, i.e. Russian, Soviet or Western historians, approach the history of the Jews of Belorussia? Did they attempt to define this community and the territory it covered? What was the role they assigned to Belorussian Jews within the larger group of Ashkenazi Jews?

Jewish-Russian Historiography

In Russia, interest in Jewish studies is relatively recent. The *Haskalah* (Jewish enlightenment) and the German *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism), which subjected Judaism to scientific criticism and marked the inception of Jewish studies[5] reached the Russian Empire and developed its own specificities there in the second half of the nineteenth century. Jewish studies however took a different ideological tack in Russia[6]: whereas the German *Haskalah* and *Wissenschaft* were aimed at revitalizing the Jews and integrating them into the non-Jewish culture at the cost of a rejection of the traditional lifestyle and a renewal of religion, the Jewish intellectuals of Russia remained attached to their background and oriented their studies on the contrary towards the Jewish people, the crucible of true Jewish culture and the heroes of the future which was viewed as a struggle against the Czarist regime. Whereas the German *maskilim* (the proponents of *Haskalah*), like the first Russian *maskilim,* stressed the need to learn a 'pure' language (German, Russian or Hebrew) and to use science and history as tools for the construction of a worthy, coherent, ethical Judaism, divested of all its idiosyncrasies[7], the Russian *maskilim* of the end of the nineteenth century took part and contributed to the emergence of a Jewish nationalism that manifested itself politically (Zionism, Bund, Folkism, *Poale Zion*[8]) as well as culturally (literature, theater, plastic arts). In contrast to the German

[5] See articles by Sylvie Anne Goldberg and in particular: "L'étude du judaïsme: science historique ou religieuse? " *Préfaces*, 19, juin-septembre 1990, pp.88-95 ; "Histoire juive, Histoire des Juifs : d'autres approches", *Annales HSS*, sept-oct 1994, n.5, pp.1019-1029, "Les études juives, héritage scientifique ou legs mémorial?", in Alvarez-Pereyre (éd), *Milieux et mémoire,* Jérusalem, Cahiers du CRFJ, 1993, pp. 327-343.

[6] See Goldberg, Sylvie Anne, "Penser l'histoire juive au début du XXe siècle" , in *Cahiers du Monde russe,* 41/4, oct-déc 2000, pp.519-534.

[7] The Jews of Eastern Europe do not appear in the *History of the Jewish People* by Henrich Graetz in 11 volumes. Similarly, kabbala and Jewish mysticism were minimized by the Wissenschaft historians (Goldberg, *Les études juives* op.cit, p.337.)

[8] *Bund* (General Federation of Jewish Workers in Russia, Poland and Lithuania): Jewish Socialist party founded in 1897 and disbanded in Russia in 1921. Originally close to the internationalist social-democrats, it defended the interests of the Jews in Russia and called for cultural autonomy for the Jews as of 1903. Folkism or *folkspartei*: political movement founded by Dubnow in 1906 in

Wissenschaft that tried to eradicate Jewish specificities and create a new Jew, Eastern Jews attempted to preserve the culture of Yiddishland threatened by waves of pogroms, immigration, modernization and rapid urbanization. "These Eastern European researchers defended a Judaism that they saw as authentically alive, and whose culture in their eyes was not part of a defunct past but truly one of the present day".[9]

As of the 1880s, there was a rapid rise of ethnographic expeditions and socio-economic studies describing the harsh living conditions of Jews in the Pale of Settlement, and novels in Yiddish involving popular heroes from the *shtetl* (Jewish townships). In 1892, the establishment of a Jewish historical and ethnographic commission in St. Petersburg testifies to the awareness among Jewish intellectuals of the need to delve into the history of the Jews of Russia to find answers to current day issues. The commission was under the auspices of the Society for the Spread of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia. Its members assigned themselves the task of seeking and collecting documents on the history of Russian Jewry, documents which were published in a three-volume set.[10] Other cultural institutions were founded at the turn of the century in Russia. In the field of music, the Society for Jewish Folk Music (1908) was founded to preserve Jewish folk traditions. The forming of a National Jewish School of the Arts was prompted by the founding of a Circle of Jewish Artists, inspired by the ideas of the art critic Stasov and by the opening of a technological art school in Vilna by the sculptor Iyla Ginsburg (1902). In 1916, the founding of the Society for the Encouragement of Jewish Art further encouraged a certain number of Jewish artists (Nathan Altman, Ilya Ginsburg) to found a National Jewish School. Historical research was encouraged by the Jewish Historical and Ethnographical Society founded in 1908, whose members included the most eminent politicians (M. Vinaver), historians (S. Dubnow, M. Kulisher, M. Vishnitzer) and writers (S. An-Ski) of the time. Within the framework of this Society, the writer and folklore specialist S. An-Ski conducted an ethnological expedition in the Ukraine from 1912-1914. The folklore collected during this time (tales, songs, objects, drawings) was exhibited at the Jewish Ethnographic Museum, which opened in 1916 in Petrograd. From 1909 to 1913, researchers gave numerous scientific lectures. Jewish associations diversified: some were aimed at promoting the history and the culture of the Jewish people, others fought anti-Semitism or were for the advancement of education among Jews, still others were solely involved in the dissemination of Hebrew or dealt with the economic plight of the Jews of Russia. This historical effervescence was preceded and accompanied by the appearance of numerous periodicals and collections of articles that published historians' works. The first periodical that attempted to regularly feature studies on the history of the Jews of Russia was *Evreiskaya biblioteka*, published by Landau from 1871 to 1903 in Saint Petersburg. At the turn of the century, historians could also publish their research in the magazine *Voskhod* and the monthly collection of articles *Budushchnost* (1899-1904). The magazine *Perezhitoe*, entirely devoted to the history of the Jews of

Russia whose platform was for cultural autonomism for the Jews. *Poale Zion*: the Socialist Zionist party founded in 1906.

[9] Goldberg, *Penser l'histoire*, p.528.

[10] *Regesty i nadpisi: svod materialov po istorii evreev v Rossii* (Registers and Records: Corpus of Material on the History of Russian Jewry), Saint-Petersburg, 1899-1913.

Russia, was published from 1910 to 1913; the initial aim of the editors of the publication, Saul Ginsburg and Yuli Gessen, was to publish historical source material of all types, archival documents, personal accounts, or folklore (songs, tales, letters or material collected by An-Ski in the *shtetlekh*.) The major historians of the time (Gessen, Tsinberg, Marek, An-Ski, Ginsburg, etc) contributed abundantly to these previous volumes, publishing their research based on previously untapped sources and paving the way for a new area of research in Jewish history: the involvement of Jews in political struggles. The journal *Evreiskaya Starina*, the official publication of the Jewish historical and ethnographic society, was published from 1909 to 1916, and featured, like *Perezhitoe*, documents and scientific articles. The editor in chief, S. Dubnow, was able to implement his program and his concept of history that gave precedence to the publication of *pinkasim* (records of the Jewish communities) accompanied by commentaries, as well as other documents reflecting Jewish culture (letters, memoirs, eye -witness accounts of pogroms). With contributions from numerous specialists, all the major Jewish centers in the Russian Empire found their place in these publications. A series of articles dealt with Jewish political movements and national literature. In the end, economic and political problems related to WWI halted the publication of these periodicals. However, as of the end of 1910, the historiography of the Jews of Russia had reached such a qualitative and quantitative level that work on an encyclopedia of the history of the Jewish people was begun. It finally comprised 15 volumes, five of which were devoted to Russia and involved all the experts of the time: Dubnow, Marek, Tsinberg, Vishnitzer, Ginsburg. One volume was devoted to the history of the Jews in Poland and Lithuania from the twelfth century to the seventeenth century.[11] Finally, the monumental work of this generation of historians was the Jewish Encyclopedia (*Evreiskaya entsiklopedia*) in 16 volumes, published between 1908 and 1913, under the editorial leadership of Lev Katznelson.

Within the framework of a national historiography of the Jews of Eastern Europe most of the Jewish historians of Russia viewed the Jewish population they studied as a homogeneous unit[12]. We shall see that they only rarely took regional differences into account – in particular as regards Belorussia.

Ilya Orshansky (1846-1875) a jurist and legal journalist, was the first to study the economic conditions of Russian Jews. Within this framework, he only mentioned Belorussia as a region in the Russian Empire. However, as regards the Polish era, he contrasted Ukrainian Jews to the Belorussian, Lithuanian and Polish Jews, and showed that the situation of the former was better than that of the latter before the

[11] *Istoria evreiskogo naroda* (History of the Jewish People), XI : *Istoria evreev v Rossii* (History of the Jews in Russia) , Moscow, 1914.

[12] For an overview of the historiography of Russian Jewry, see Ganelin, R.Ch., Kellner, V.E., *Problemy istoriografii evreev v Rossii (2-aa polovina 19 veka 1-aa tchetvert 20 veka*) Problems of Historiography of the Jews of Russia (2d half of the 19th century and 1st quarter of the 20th century), in *Evrei v Rossii. Istoriograficheskie ocheriki (2-aa polovina 19 veka - 20 vek.)*, Moscow, 1994, p.181-255 ; Lokchin, A., Loudaka v Rossii (Jewish Studies in Russia), in *Evrei v Rossiskoi Imperii XVIII-XIX vekov. Sbornik trudov evreiskikh istorikov*, Moscow-Jerusalem, Evreiski universitet v Moskve-Gesharim, 1995, pp.5-27

Chmielnicki massacre in the Ukraine in 1648.[13] In a posthumous work, he described Russian Jewish decrees (St. Petersburg, 1877) where allusions to Belorussia were rare and limited to the annexation of Belorussia by Russia in 1772, proselytism by a converted Jew originally from Vitebsk and a senator's report on the famine of 1800 in Belorussia.

The first professional historian of the Jews of the East, Serge Bershadsky (1850-1896) was equally inattentive to the Jews of Belorussia. A lawyer by training, he was the first to carry out a scientific study on the legal status of Jews in Russia. He was also behind the publication of archival documents he collected in Moscow, Kiev and Vilna.[14] In his remarkable study of the Jews of Lithuania[15] he examined the legal status of the Russian Jews during the period they were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1388-1569). Within this framework, Belorussia does not appear – it is included as part of Lithuania (Grand Duchy, or *Roussia*, *Ruthenia*). He only uses the term Belorussia to refer to the territory annexed by the Russian Empire in 1772.

Simon Dubnow (1860-1941) although originally from Belorussia (Mstislav), had scientific and political ambitions that extended beyond the borders of his native land. He devoted himself to filling in the gaps left by Graetz, by writing not only the history of the Jews of Russia but also a universal history of the Jews.[16] His work was associated with the Jewish national autonomism movement in Russia at the end of the 19th century, in which he took part. He envisioned an extra-territorial cultural autonomy for the Jewish people within the Russian Empire, believing that the Jews were at a higher level of civilization and that they did not need to create their own state.[17] He felt that "it was impossible to separate the history of the Jews of Russia from their history in Poland and Lithuania since the Jews of all countries formed, despite differences and local variants, a single unit of culture and life. They had a common past, and had undergone and were undergoing the same fate, they had lived and continued to live under the same regime and the forefathers of all modern day Russian Jews were Polish Jews at the time when the current Pale of Settlementwas part of the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom, just as the descendents of Polish Jews were currently Russian Jews. Only the external political conditions had changed, and the ethnographic unity remained."[18] He was the first to draw up a complete chronological history starting from the first settlements of Jews from Germany in Poland up to the

[13] *Evrei v Rossii* (The Jews in Russia), Saint-Petersburg, 1872, pp.320-321

[14] In *Voskhod* et *Evreskaia biblioteka*. See also Bershadsky, *Rossko-evreiski arkhiv : dokumenty i materialy dlia istorii evreev v Rossii* (Russian-Jewish archives: documents and material for the history of the Jews of Russia) 3 volumes, St. Petersburg, 1893.

[15] Bershadsky, *Litovskie evrei. Istoria ikh iuridicheskogo i obshchestvennogo polozhenii v Litve. 1388-1569* (The Lithuanian Jews: History of their Legal and Social status in Lithuania 1388-1569) Saint-Petersburg, 1883, 431 p.

[16] Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Philadelphia, 1916-1920,idem, *Histoire moderne du peuple juif (1789-1938)*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1994, 1792; idem, *Histoire universelle du peuple juif*, 10 vol., 1925-1929.

[17] See Dubnow, Simon, *Lettres sur le judaïsme ancien et nouveau*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1989, 520 p

[18] Dubnow, Ob izuchenie istorii russkikh evreev i ob utchrezhdenii russko-evreskogo istoricheskogo obshchestva (On the study of the History of the Jews and on the Institution of the Historical Russian-Jewish Society, Saint Petersburg, 1891, quoted in Ganelin, Kelner, *Problemy istoriografii*, *op.cit.*, pp.187-188

third partition of Poland in 1795, which marked the beginning of the history of the Jews in the Russian Empire. A pioneer in the use of Jewish documents, he used the *pinkasim* and the statutes of the brotherhoods as a historical source since he wanted above all to study the internal affairs of the communities. He published several documents in *Voskhod* concerning the Jewish communities of Belorussia in the XVII and XVIII centuries[19]. In his works, Dubnow mentioned White Russia as a part of the northwestern region of the Russian Empire. It is mentioned abundantly in the sections devoted to the integration of Polish Jews into the Russian Empire after the first partition of Poland (1772-1793). In fact the region acquired by Russia covered the regions of Mogilev and Vitebsk and was officially named Belorussia or White Russia depending on the translation. Belorussia is mentioned at several other points by Dubnow as an area of settlement of the Hassidic community led by Shneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad movement (or Lubavitch), as a land which had undergone two famines (1800 and 1821) that prompted sending inspectors to determine the causes, and finally as the birthplace, along with Lithuania, of the Jewish labor movement. Thus Dubnow acknowledged the existence of the Belorussian region within the Russian Empire and differentiated it from Lithuania. However he was not interested in the specificity of this territory and did not describe its specific history aside from a few episodes. The other historians of Dubnow's generation took a similar position.

Israel Tsinberg (1873-1939), a historian of culture and literature, and the author of a vast history of the Jewish press in Russia as related to social movements (Petrograd, 1915) placed Belorussia in Lithuania, and presented Shneur Zalman as the head of the Lithuanian Hassidim.[20] Meir Balaban, in Bershadsky's footsteps, primarily wrote on the legal status of Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom and the Russian empire, and took little interest in local particularities. As a specialist of the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, Saul Ginsburg (1866-1940) worked on the beginnings of *Haskala* in Russia, the military (cantonist) regime imposed by Czar Nicholas 1st on the Jews, and the participation of Jews in the Franco-Prussian war of 1812 and on the educational policies conducted by Nicholas 1st and supported by the Russian *maskilim*.[21] He focused his studies on the beginnings of *Haskalah* on Belorussia because the first *maskilim* came from Shklov (in the Mogilev region) or settled there. Like other researchers, he mentioned Belorussia in connection with Senator Derzhavin's survey and report on the region. The Belorussian provinces were battlefields during the war of 1812, involving Jews

[19] Belorusski kagalny sejm (The Belorussian Community Council), *Voskhod*, 4, 1894, pp.33-41; Dva dokumenta po istorii belorusskikh evreev v pervoi polovine XVIII veka (Two documents on the history of Belorussian Jewry in the first half of the 18th century), *Voskhod*, 1-2, 1889, pp.176-184; Istoricheskii soobshcheniia: podgtovitelnyia raboty dlia istorii russkikh evreev: oblastny kagalnye seimy v voevodstve volinskom i v belorusii (1666-1764), (Historical information. Preparatory work for the History of Russian Jews: the Regional Community Councils in the Province of Volhynia and in Belorussia) *Voskhod*, n.4, (1894), pp.25-44.

[20] Tsinberg, I., *Predtechi evreiskogo prosveshchenia v Rossii* (the Forerunners of the Jewish Enlightenment in Russia, *Evreski vestnik*, Leningrad, 1928, reproduced in Lokchin, *Evrei v Rossiskoi Imperi, op. cit.*, p.226

[21] Ginsburg, S.M., *Minouvshchee. Istoricheskie ocherki, stati i kharakteristiki* (The Past: Studies, Articles and Historical Features), Petrograd, 1923, 207 p.

from the whole empire. Ginsburg wrote about one of the episodes of the history of the Jews in Belorussia[22] but nevertheless did not make it a separate area of investigation.

Piotr (Peretz) Marek (1862-1920) devoted an article to the specific history of the Belorussian Jews.[23] Using new data, he completed studies conducted by Bershadsky, Maggid and Dubnow on the Belorussian synagogue, known in Hebrew as *vaad medinat raisn* and specified the geographical limits of this regional council in the 17th and 18th centuries. Up to then, historians believed that the Belorussian council only covered the region of Mogilev, but Marek showed through the use of *pinkasim* that the region of Vitebsk was also included. He gave a great deal of detail on the functions and the role of this regional council, independent of the Lituanian *vaad* and the *vaad* of the Four Lands which united most of the Jewish communities of Poland and the Ukraine. This was thus an important contribution to the specific history of Belorussian Jewry. In his works on education where he described the struggle between the religious and traditional school system and the secular, reform-oriented one, he also mentions the situation in Belorussia and Lithuania several times.

Finally, the Russian Jewish historian who took the greatest interest in Belorussia as such was Yuli Gessen (1871-1939). He began his research on the history of the Jews of Russia in the 1890s. His entire work was based on both Jewish and Russian sources. He was the first to carefully study official legislative documents (such as the Statute of 1804). He felt it primordial to study a large number of official documents on the Jewish question and regulations of Jewish life. The economic and legal situation of the Jews was also one of his main concerns.[24] In 1914 he published a remarkable and extremely thorough monograph that traced the history of the Jews of Russia in all its facets, since the partitions of Poland.[25] It was criticized for its choice of time frame, which did not include the Lithuanian and Polish past of these Jews, and for his decision to exclusively study the relationships between the central government and the Jews, disregarding the internal functioning of the Jewish community. Gessen took these criticisms into account when he published his collected works in 1916, which was completed by a second volume in 1925.[26] This second volume included a summary of the history of the Jews of Russia from the first signs of their presence in Crimea, the role of the Jewish Khazars, the attitude of Moscovia towards them and their status at the time of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the kingdom of Poland. The main focus however of his work was still on the conditions of the Jews in the Russian Empire from 1772 to the end of the nineteenth century. For researchers dealing with the Jews of Belorussia, Yuli Gessen's books and articles are precious because they present large amounts of precise and concrete

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[22] Ginsburg, S.M., *Otechestvennaia voina 1812 goda i russkie evrei* (The War of 1812 and the Russian Jews), Saint-Petersburg, 1912

[23] *Ocherki po istorii prosveshchenia evreev v Rossii* (Studies on the History of Education of the Jews in Russia), Moscow, 1909 ; Belorusskaia sinagoga i eia territoria (The Belorussian Synagogue and its Territory), *Knizhki Voskhoda*, 1903, n.5, pp.71-91

[24] See Gessen, Y. I., *Evrei v Rossii* (The Jews in Russia), Saint-Petersburg, 1906.

[25] Gessen, *Istoria evreev v Rossii* (History of the Jews in Russia), Saint-Petersburg, 1914.

[26] Gessen, *Istoria evreskogo naroda v Rossii* (History of the Jewish People in Russia), 2 volumes, Petrograd, 1916-1925, reprinted Moscow-Jerusalem, Evreiski universitet v Moskve/Gesharim, 1993.

data on their life. This historian worked extensively on the incorporation of former Polish Jews into the Russian Empire and the Russian government's formulation of a specific Jewish policy. Since the first region incorporated by Russia in 1772 was Belorussia, Gessen's subject of inquiry was obviously the Jews of Belorussia. However in contrast to his colleagues and contemporaries, he was not content to view Belorussia as a representative part of a whole, namely Russian Jewry. He revealed certain features specific to Belorussian Jews: because they were the first to grapple with the Russian administration and rule, they attempted to obtain the most advantageous legal status possible, and preserve privileges inherited from the Polish era. Gessen showed the talent and determination of the representatives of the Jewish communities of Belorussia in their negotiations with the Russian authorities. He emphasized the preeminence of Belorussian Jews in the political and cultural arenas at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. He also stressed the perseverance of the leaders of Belorussian communal system and their hold and power over the Jewish population. Through their sense of organization and their unity, the Jews of Belorussia were able to obtain, in the first decades of Russian rule, access to city political office, equality with the merchant and middle classes, and avoided discriminatory measures (expulsion from the countryside, prohibition to distill or sell alcohol). Their status was envied by the communities that were incorporated after the second and third partitions of Poland (1793, 1795). In a comparative approach it can be seen through the works of Gessen that the Jews of the Russian Empire did not all have the same status before 1804: the Jews of Lithuania were deprived of civil rights and forbidden to hold elected municipal office; the Jews of Kamenetz-Podolski, Kiev and Vilna were threatened with expulsion. Finally Gessen showed the key role played by a handful of wealthy Belorussian merchants, with influence on St. Petersburg governmental circles, in the drawing up of the first sweeping regulations concerning Jews, the Statute of 1804. The Belorussian exemption over the first few decades was rapidly eliminated by a standardization of the status of Jews throughout the Empire as of 1804, but it constitutes one of the prime episodes in the specific history of this community. Today, Gessen's works can be found in all libraries in Russia and Belorussia. They have become the reference, on an equal footing with works by Dubnow.

Historians were not alone in their interest in the situation of the Jews in Russia. Geographers, economists and statisticians studied the conditions of Jews in Russia at the time. Numerous writers have used the results of the first census of the population of the Russian Empire, conducted in 1897.[27] Many of these socio-economic studies were conducted within the framework or with the support of the Jewish Colonization Association, whose St Petersburg branch opened in 1893.

Victor Nikitin (1839-1908), a Jew converted by force during his years in the army, used the archives of the ministry of agriculture to paint a complete picture of the situation of Jewish farmers in the Pale of Settlement.[28] I. Zelenski provided data on

[27] The census data for the Jewish population can be found in: *Evreiskoe naselenie Rossii (po dannym perepisi 1897 g. i po noveishim istochnikam)* (The Jewish population of Russia (according to data from the 1897 census and new sources))Petrograd, 1917.

[28] Nikitin, V.N., *Evrei-zemledel_tsy. Istoricheskoe, zakonodatelnoe, administrativnoe i bytovoe polozhenie kolonii so vremeni ikh vozniknovenia, 1807-1887* (Jewish Farmers. Historical, legal, administrative and living conditions, 1807-1887), Saint-Petersburg, 1887; idem, *Evreiskie poselenia*

the number of inhabitants in the province of Minsk, their distribution according to social class and occupation, the role of rabbis in the Jewish community and the situation of the Jews in the Minsk region[29]. In other articles, other statistical data are available on the Jewish population in the Vitebsk province at different periods[30] and on other Belorussian communities[31]. L. Rokhlin, a former physician and rabbi, wrote a detailed statistical and economic study of his township of Krasnopol in Mogilev province, considering that the situation in the town was representative of all townships in the Pale of Settlement.[32] This study nevertheless contains information taken from Russian and Jewish sources on the growth of Jewish economic and cultural life in a small Belorussian town.

Andre Subbotin (1852-1906) also produced an analysis of all the features of Jewish life in the Belorussian community of Minsk. This analysis formed the first part of his survey of the economic activities of Jews in the pale of settlement.[33]. As Orshansky had done for the Jews of Russia in general, he analyzed the economic structure of Jewish society within the context of Minsk. He shows the preponderance of Jews in light industry, trade and crafts. His presentation refutes a certain number of anti-Semitic prejudices: it is shown that Jews perform physical labor (paving streets), that merchants are often very poor and that Jewish houses are neat and clean. Other preconceived notions about Jews are confirmed: their flair for business, the preponderance of moneylenders and go-betweens, the monopoly of the sale of alcohol, solidarity and philanthropy within the community. This outsider's view, from the point of view of a Christian Russian, was also enlightening as regards day-to-day relationships between the Mujiks, Belorussians and Jews, relationships made up of distrust and apparent brutality. Subbotin was astonished, in passing, by the sobriety of the Belorussians as compared to the drunkenness of the Russians in the markets. He gives detailed and precise information on the religious and daily life of

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severo iugo-zapadnykh gubernii, 1835-1890 (The Jewish settlements in the western provinces in the north and south 1835-1890), Saint-Petersburg, 1894.

[29] Zelensky, I., *Materialy dlia geografii i statistikiRossii, Minskaia gubernia* (Material for the geography and Statistics of Russia: Minsk province), 2 volumes, Saint-Petersburg, 1864.

[30] Ch-d. Ia., K statistike evreskogo naselenia po dannym perepisi 1897 g. (Statistics of the Jewish Population according to the census data of 1897), *Knizhki Voskhoda*, n.6, 1903, pp.73-99; Korobkov, Perepis evreiskago naselenia Vitebskoi gubernii v 1772 g.(Census of the Jewish Population of the Province of Vitebsk in 1772), *Evreiskaia starina*, 1912.

[31] See for example Lurie, O., Dubrovninskie evrei-kustari (The Jewish Craftsmen of Dubrovno), *Voskhod*, september 1889; Donkhin, B., Iz prochlogo evreskikh obshchin v gorode Liutsine i ego uezde (On the past of the Jewish communities in Liutzin and in its district), *Evreiskaia starina*, 1912; Mstislavski [Dubnow], Evrei v Mogilevskoi gubernii (The Jews in the province of Mogilev), *Voskhod*, 1886, n.9

[32] Rokhlin, L.L., *Mestechko Krasnopole Mogilevskoi gub. Opyt statistiko-ekonomicheskogo opisania tipitchnogo mestechka cherty evreskoi osedlosti* (The Town of Krasnopol, province of Mogilev. Statistical-Economic Descriptive Essay of a Typical Town in the Pale of Settlement) Saint-Petersburg, 1908.

[33] Subbotin, A.P., *V cherte osedlosti. Otryvki iz ekonomicheskikh issledovanii v zapadno i iougo-zapadno Rossii za leto 1887* (In the Pale of Settlement: Excerpts from Economic Studies in Western and South Western Russia for the Year 1887), n.1 : Minsk, Vilna, Kovno and their regions, Saint-Petersburg, 1888.

the Jews and gives an in-depth portrait of the Minsk community. This is a full and accurate study of the largest Jewish community of Belorussia.

Indirectly, through the specific studies and more generalized works presented above, the historian of the Jews of Belorussia may glean information on his or her topic and reconstitute the specific eras of the history of the Jews of Belorussia. At the same time as the construction of this history of the Jews of Eastern Europe, a few historical studies took a more nationalistic orientation. At the start of the twentieth century, interest in the Ukraine gave rise to the publication of numerous articles and pamphlets on the situation of the Jews in that region, and in particular in Odessa, the cultural and multi-ethnic capital. The history of the Jews of the Ukraine was separated for the first time from the history of the Jews of Lithuania, Poland and even Russia, through articles by Galant. The Jews of the Caucasus were also studied separately. However it was not until the 1920s and the process of Belorussianization that the Jews of Belorussia had their first historians. This second generation of historians emphasized Yiddish to the detriment of Russian and selected research topics associated with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Soviet Historiography

The Soviet Union, throughout the 1920s, promoted the emergence and the growth of national cultures in the Ukraine, Belorussia and other republics. Belorussification was visible in the opening of universities and institutes in all fields (medical, veterinary, agricultural, literary, scientific). In the 1920s, there was an unprecedented expansion of culture in the Republic of Belorussia. There were four official languages: Belorussian, Russian, Polish and Yiddish. The Jews, like other minorities in the Republic, also gained from the positive Soviet policy towards the growth of culture. In the Institute for Belorussian Culture (*Inbelkult*) founded in 1922, a Jewish faculty was created for research on the Jewish language, literature, history and archeology.[34] In 1925, the faculty had four departments around which the following activities were coordinated: the study of Jewish languages, history, literature and pedagogy. At the same time, Jewish faculties opened in other State universities, in Pedagogical Institutes and the '*technicums*' (technological institutes) in order to train the national executives of Jewish Bureau of the Communist Party of Belorussia. In December 1928, the Jewish faculty of *Inbelkult* was transformed into the Jewish Faculty of the Academy of Sciences. It was divided into seven departments devoted to history, linguistics, socio-economics, dialects and terminology, history of Jewish literature, the study of Jewish folklore and regional ethnology. The historical and ethnological departments were eliminated at the end of 1929. In 1932, modeled on this Jewish faculty, the Institute of Proletarian Jewish Culture was founded and was composed of historical, literary, linguistic,

[34] On Jewish cultural institutions, see Ioffe, E.G., *Stranitsy istorii evreev Belarusi* (Pages of History of the Belorussian Jews), Minsk, Arti Feks 1997, p.95; Gerasimova, I., Problemy izuhenia istorii evreev Belarusi v otechestvenno istoriografii (Problems of the study of the history of Belorussian Jews in national historiography), *Evrei Belarusi*, vol. I, Minsk, 1997, pp.7-18; Gerasimava, I., Navoukovae zhytstse iaureiau Belarusi 1920-30 gady (Scientific life of Jews in Belorussia in the years 1920-1930), in *Natsyanalnya menchastsi Belarousi,* n.2, Brest-Minsk-Vitebsk, 1996, pp.65-67.

socio-economic and anti-religious departments. The ideological and scientific line of this institute was oriented towards the struggle against nationalistic and clerical tendencies; research on Jewish culture was rare and encountered increasingly virulent criticism. In 1935, all the institutes connected to history and the culture of minority groups were reassigned to the Institute of National Minorities. This institute was liquidated in 1937.

The existence of official institutions stimulated historical research and gave researchers the means and the tools they needed for their work. They were able to publish books and articles in the historical journals which emerged during the 1920s, *Tsaytshrift* and *Royte Bleter*. Their originality and difference as compared to Russian Jewish historiography at the turn of the century is related to the preponderant use of Yiddish in the publications. We shall see that this scientific output had all the features of an emergent national historiography.

Izrail Sosis (1878-1936?) a former member of the Bund (General Federation of Jewish Workers in Russia, Poland and Lithuania), the head of the historical department in the Jewish faculty of *Inbelkult*, taught Jewish history at the State University during the 1920s. He published an article in *Tsaytshrift* on the conditions, organization and apprenticeship of Jewish craftsmen belonging to corporations in Belorussia, Lithuania and the Ukraine.[35] His works deal with the socio-economic, political and cultural situation of the Jews in Russia.[36] In contrast to the historians of the previous generation, Sosis made it his duty to always refer to the Jews of Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia and the Ukraine when he discussed the period prior to the partition of Poland. However, like his predecessors, he only vaguely sketched out the social and cultural history of the Jews as a whole in the Pale of Settlement. He only made regional distinctions on rare occasions, for instance to note that Belorussia, Poland and Lithuania were spared by the pogroms of 1880, in contrast to the Ukraine.

This same approach can be found in other historians: L. Holomchtok (1896-1938) describes the social exchanges between Jews and non-Jews as well as within Jewish society in Poland before the partitions and through Hassidic tales of the eighteenth century. In addition, he wrote his doctoral dissertation in 1937 under Sosis on the history of Belorussia. Jacob Leshtsinsky (1876-1966) provided researchers with a precious statistical tool in a book on worldwide Jewish populations. There are several chapters on the number of Jews in Russia and in the Pale of Settlement. Finally O. Margolis published a collection of documents and studies on the history of Jews in Russia.[37] It includes many documents concerning Belorussia.

Some researchers worked specifically on Belorussia. Hillel Aleksandrov (1890-1972) headed the socio-demographic department of *Inbelkult* and taught at the State

[35] Sosis, I., Yidishe balmelokhes un zeier arbeter in lite, vaisrusland un ukrainein 18-tn iorhundert (Jewish craftsmen and their workers in Lithuania, Belorussia and the Ukraine in the 18th century), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.4, 1930, pp.1-29.

[36] Sosis, I, *Di geshikhte fun di yidishe gezelshaftlekhe shtremungen in rusland in 19tn iorhundert* (The history of Jewish social trends in Russia in the 19th century), Minsk, 1929; idem, *di sotsial-ekonomishe lage fun di rusishe yidn* (The socio-economic status of Russian Jews), Petrograd, 1919.

[37] Margolis, O., *Geshikhte fun yidn in rusland (etiudn un dokumentn)* (History of the Jews in Russia; Studies and Documents), 1st volume: 1772-1861, Moscow-Kharkov-Minsk, 1930

University in the Jewish pedagogy department. His research, published in *Tsaytshrift* dealt with the demography, history, and the sociology of the Jews of Belorussia. It is worth mentioning his contribution to the study of the community of Minsk, through the publication of archival documents.[38] Lastly, there is a series of articles published in the second issue of *Tsaytshrift* on Jewish farmers and the Jewish settlements in Belorussia[39].

Parallel to these topicalized studies of the Jews of Belorussia, a then-dominant Sovietized trend in historiography emerged in historians such as Agurski Bukhbinder and S. Dimanshtein. Their research was almost exclusively devoted to the history of the revolutionary movement in Belorussia and Jewish participation in it. Samuel Agurski (1884-c.-1948) one of the founders of the Jewish section of the Communist Party in 1918 (*evsektsia*) published (in Minsk) one of the first works in Russian on the history of the revolutionary movement among the Jews.[40] This is a documented work on Bolshevism among Jews, the liquidation of the Bund and all the Jewish non-Bolshevik parties and the establishment of *evsektsia*. A high-quality contribution to Jewish-Belorussian history, his study of the revolutionary movement in Belorussia goes back to the origins of the socialist and nationalist movement in Belorussia and constitutes a thorough and well-documented analysis of the economic, social and political situation in Belorussia from the Polish uprising of 1863 to the revolution of 1917.[41] In 1935, Agurski published a collection of documents and accounts in Yiddish and in Russian of the emergence of Jewish political movements in Lithuania and Belorussia.[42] In particular there is material on

[38] Alexsandrov, H., Di yidishe bafelkerung in minsk loyt di folk-tseytlungen fun 1897 un 1926, (The Jewish Population of Minsk according to the Census of 1897 and 1926), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.4, 1930, pp.199-224; Di yidishe bafelkerung in shtetlekh fun vaysrusland (The Jewish Population in the Towns of Belorussia), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.2-3, 1928, pp.307-378; Di yidishe bafelkerung in vaysrusland in der tsayt fun di tseteylungen fun Poyln (The Jewish Population in Belorussia at the time of the Partitions of Poland), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.4, 1930, pp.31-83; Di ekonomishe un statistishe "forshungen" fun yidishn visnshaftlekhn institut (Economic and Statistical Studies of the Jewish Scientific Institute), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.4, 1930, pp.296-331; Dierjavtses un kahal (The powerful and the Kahal), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.4, 1930, pp.121-124; Fun minsker arkhivn_ (From the Archives of Minsk), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.2-3, 1928, pp.763-778; _Rekrutshine un di kazione yidishe shuln, (The Recruitment and the Jewish State Schools), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.4, 1930, pp.125-132.

[39] Borovoi, Sh., Di yidishe kolonies noch der tsveyter ibervanderung fun vaysrusland (The Jewish Settlements after the Second Migration from Belorussia), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.2-3, 1928, pp.111-138; Byjevitsh, A., Di lage fun di yidishe kolonistn noch der driter ibervanderung fun vaysrusland (The Situation of Jewish Settlers after the Third Migration from Belorussia), in *Tsaytshrift*, n. 2-3, 1928, pp.137-156; S.I., Di yidishe erd-kolonizatsie in der ershter helft fun 19-tn iorhundert (Jewish Settlement in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.2-3, 1928, pp.109-112; Ugorski, I., Di yidishe erdarbet in vaisrusland (Jewish Farming in Belorussia), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.2-3, 1928, pp.189-260.

[40] Agurski, S., *Evreski rabotchi v kommunisticheskom dvizhenii (1917-1921)* (The Jewish Workers in the Communist Movement, 1917-1921), Minsk, Gosoudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo Beloroussii, 1926; Agurski, S., *1905 in vaysrusland. Zamlung* (1905 in Bielorussia. Collection), Minsk, 1925, 226 p.

[41] Agurski, S., *Ocherki po istorii revoliutsionnogo dvizheni a v Belorusii (1863-1917)* (Studies on the History of the Revolutionary Movement in Belorussia), Minsk, 1928.

[42] Agurski, S., *Di sotsialistishe literatur af yidish in 1875-1897* (Socialist Literature in Yiddish in 1875-1897), volume 2, Minsk, Farlag fun der vaisrusisher visnshaft-akademie, 1935, 452 p. See also Agurski, S., *1905 in vaysrusland. op.cit*.

the birth of the labor movement in Minsk, Gomel and Vitebsk and excerpts from the Jewish newspaper *Yidisher Arbeter*.

Nahum Bukhbinder (1895-?) furnished a useful tool for Jewish political history with a collection of biographical articles on the participants in the Jewish revolutionary movement.[43] Two years later, he published a panorama of the Jewish labor movement, starting with the 1870s and extending up to the end of the Czarist era, based on the archives of the Czarist police.[44] His study of the labor movement in Gomel provides a wealth of documents.[45]

Despite his desire to conduct objective historical research, Simon Dimanshtein (1886-1937) remained closely tied to the dogma of the Bolshevik party he joined in 1904, and which he worked for until the purges of 1937. In 1930, he published a collection of memoirs by participants in the Jewish revolutionary movement from 1880-1890.[46] The work includes first-person accounts of Minsk, Vitebsk, Grodno, the Bund and the Yiddish press. In his introduction Dimanshtein criticizes the Jewish political movements (and the Bund in particular) which took, in his view, an overly nationalistic stance, distancing themselves from Communism and hence running counter internationalist ideology. He also criticized the Jewish political parties for not having conducted their revolutionary activities among non-Jews.

These three historians published articles in a Yiddish journal, the *Royte Bleter*, one issue of which was printed in Minsk in 1929. Other essays in Yiddish dealing with the unfolding of the Russian revolutions in Belorussia, often well documented and replete with statistics[47], can also be linked to this historiographic trend.

The Russian revolution gave a new dimension as well as a new orientation to Jewish Russian historiography. It enabled it to become a scientific field and to have an important place in institutions founded during the 1920s, in particular in Minsk. Secondly, it oriented Jewish historiography towards the participation of Jews in the revolution. This recognition of the role played by Jews in the struggle against Czarism, combined with the granting of citizenship and equal civil rights to Jews

[43] Bukhbinder, N.A., *Materialy dla istorii evreiskogo rabochego dvizhenia v Rossii* (Material on the History of the Jewish Labor Movement in Russia), n.1, Moscow-Petrograd, 1922.

[44] Bukhbinder, N.A., *Istoria evreiskogo rabochego dvizhenia v Rossii. Po neizdannym arkhivym materialam* (History of the Jewish Labor Movement in Russia according to Unpublished Archival Material), Leningrad, 1925.

[45] Bukhbinder, N.A., Evreiskoe rabochee dvizhenie v Gomele 1890-1905 (The Jewish Labor Movement in Gomel,1890-1905) in *1905 god v Gomele i Polesskom raone. Materialy po istorii sotsial-demokratitcheskogo i rabotchego dvijenia v 1893-1906 gg.,* Gomel, 1925.

[46] Dimanshtein, S., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie sredi evreev* (The Revolutionary Movement Among the Jews), Moscow, Izdatelstvo vsesoiouznogo obchtchestva politkatorjan i ssyno-pocelentsev, 1930, 243 p

[47] Knorin, *1917 ior in vaisrusland un afn mairev-front* (1917 in Bielorussia on the Western Front), Minsk, Melukhe-farlag fun vaisrusland 1927, 96 p; Potash, M., *Der bolshevizm un di kleibirgerlekhe parteien in der revoliutsie fun 1905 ior in vaisrusland* (Bolshevikism and the Petit-Bourgeois Parties during the Revolution of 1905 in Belorussia), Moskve-Kharkov-Minsk, Vaisrusishe opteilung, 1931, 48 p; Eynhorn, D., Di yidishe arbeter-iugnt in vaysrusland (loyt der unterzukhung fun 1925-tn ior), (Jewish Working Youth in Belorussia according to the Survey of 1925), in *Tsaytshrift*, n.2-3, 1928, pp.379-398; Deytsh, M., Vegn mayn revolutsionere arbet (On my Revolutionary Work), *Royte Bleter*, Minsk, 1929, 24 p.

encouraged the growth of Jewish historiography. The Sovietization of historiography, which occurred in the late 1920s brought an end to the independence of Jewish historians. Up to then, Jewish researchers were not the product of the universities or academies and did not have specific training. Dubnow, Gessen and Tsinberg were Jewish intellectuals independent of the State and institutions. This first stage of Jewish Russian historiography, which started at the end of the 19th century and ended in the 1920s with the institutionalization of Jewish history and its partial submission to communist dogma. The socialist era, in studies of the Jews of Belorussia and Russia, was fruitful since it was rich in general studies on the history of the Jews of Belorussia. Nevertheless caution is needed when using these studies since they are rife with communist ideology and can in no case be considered to be totally objective.

Western Historiography

These two trends in Russian Jewish historiography have left their mark on the work of Western historians. The same thematic cleavage is also found in Western research, between generalized studies that trace the history of Russian or Polish Jews as a unit, and those which deal solely with the political life of the Jews and their place in the history of revolutionary movements in Eastern Europe.

The first generalized overview in the West was written by Israel Friedlander in 1915.[48] The book, inspired by the works of Dubnow, portrays the history of the Jews of Russia and Poland, and is aimed at the general public. Friedlander views the history of the Jews of Poland as a part of the history of the Polish people. Belorussia is encompassed by the northwest region under the name of Lithuania. The author mentions White Russia as regards the partition of Poland and the intellectual renaissance in Lithuania in certain communities led by enlightened rabbis (Volozhin, Vilna). He describes the Lithuanian Jews (energetic, informed, intellectuals) but does not deal with Belorussian Jews.

The first major historian of the Jews of Russia was Salo W. Baron. He held the first chair of Jewish history in 1930 at Columbia University. In his book *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets* [49] he covers the entire history of the Jews of Russia from the earliest events of ancient times up to the Soviet era. He discusses all the topics: legislation, anti-Semitism, education, internal organization of the communities, demographic changes and urbanization, migrations, economic structure, religion and culture, political struggles. Conducting a global study covering Russia as a whole, he cites White Russia as a region of Russia, on the same level as Lithuania, the Ukraine or New Russia.

Similar use of the term of White Russia and the same lack of interest for Belorussia can be found in other studies of the life of Jews in the Russian Empire. Louis Greenberg uses the term to designate the provinces of Vitebsk and Mogilev.[50] He mentions White Russia and Shklov in particular for the cultural advances generated

[48] Friedlander, Israel, *The Jews of Russia and Poland. A bird's eye view of their History and Culture*, New York, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1920 (first edition 1915), 210 p.
[49] Baron, Salo W., *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1964, 427 p.
[50] Greenberg, Louis, *The Jews in Russia. The struggle for emancipation*, New York, Schocken Books, 1976.

by its rabbis and "elders" (Rabbi Barukh Schick) and his disciples. Issac Levitats assimilates the Belorussians to the Russians,by stating that the Jews lived voluntarily in ghettoes in the cities of White Russia, surrounded by three nationalities – the Ukranians, Russians and Poles. [51] His approach, based exclusively on the history of the Jewish community[52], causes him to neglect the Russian data on the issue and to make historical errors.

Recent works by Israeli and American researchers have focused on the cultural history and the study of communities as regards their relationships with the surrounding non-Jewish environment[53]. Eli Lederhendler was the first to challenge the pattern of generalizing the historiography of Russian Jews by raising doubts as to the existence of a single Russian Jewish community. He highlighted the regional differences and divisions within this entity to demonstrate that "there was yet no single entity that could accurately bear the label 'Russian Jewry'. Instead, there were Jews of Poland, Lithuania, White Russia and the Ukraine, Hassidic Jews and non-Hassidic Jews"[54] This insight paved the way for research centered on regional Jewish communities.

In France, there have been relatively few studies on the history of Russian Jewry. However, the excellent overview of the history of Polish Jewry by Rachel Ertel should be mentioned.[55] She deals with one space – the sheltl- in various historical eras, from the massacres of Chmielnicki to the Holocaust. In a chapter devoted the Czarist Pale of Settlement, she however does not mention Belorussia and gives a general picture of Jewish conditions at that time. The most important French work as regards Belorussia is a collective volume dealing with *Litvakia*, or Jewish Lithuania.[56] This region of Yiddishland as defined here covers the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Its center is the Pripet marshes and covers the modern day territories of Latvia, Lithuania and Belorussia. This Litvakia, inhabited primarily by Belorussians, also had a large dominant Polish population, such that overall, the Baltic peoples were a minority.[57] The only study that really takes Belorussia into account and restricts the use of the term Lithuanian, it stresses the multiethnic nature of the region with its large Jewish population. Encompassing Belorussia, the cohesiveness of Litvakia derived from its dense inter-ethnic relations between Jews and non-Jews and hence became a center of culture and intense political activity.

Aside from the general histories on the Jews, another type of Western approach complemented Russian Marxist historiography; namely, the history of Jewish

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[51] Levitats, Isaac, *The Jewish community in Russia, 1844-1917*, Jerusalem, Posner and Sons Ltd, 1981, p.1.

[52] Levitats in fact only used Jewish sources, namely *pinkasim*.

[53] For instance: Zipperstein, Steven J., *The Jews of Odessa. A Cultural History, 1794-1881*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1986, 212 p.; Orbach, Alexander, *New Voices of Russian Jewry. A Study of the Russian-Jewish Press of Odessa in the Era of the Great Reforms, 1860-1871*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1980, 222 p.; Bartal, Israel, Opalski, Magdalena, *Poles and Jews. A Failed Brotherhood*, Hanover-London, University Press of New England, 1992, 191 p.

[54] Lederhendler, Eli, Did Russian Jewry Exist prior to 1917?, in Roi, Yaacov (ed.), *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Cummings Center Series, 1994, p.18.

[55] Ertel, Rachel, *Le shtetl. La bourgade juive de Pologne*, Paris, Payot, 1982, 321 p

[56] Plasseraud, Yves, Minczeles, Henri (dir.), *Lituanie juive 1918-1940. Message d'un monde englouti*, Paris, Autrement, Coll. Mémoires n. 44, 1996, 286 p.

[57] Plasseraud, *Lituanie juive*, p.57.

political movements in Russia at the end of the 19th century. The historians of Russian Jewry took great interest in Jews' political involvement and their revolutionary activity at the turn of the century. Writers discussing the Bund mention Belorussia because this region was the cradle of the Jewish socialist movement.

Ezra Mendelsohn[58] focused on Lithuania, the birthplace of the labor movement since the proportion of Jews in the cities was higher than in the Ukraine or in Poland. He described the working conditions and life of craftsmen of this area by choosing his examples primarily from the cities of Belorussia (Minsk, Pinsk, Vitebsk). Mendelsohn provides ample data on the class struggle in Belorussia.

Nora Levin, like Mendelsohn, has written on Jewish political movements. She devotes a chapter in her book to a description of Jewish craftsmanship in the Northwestern region of the Empire, which she calls Lithuania-White Russia.[59] She is one of the only historians to try to define the specificity of this region in its entirety in order to explain why the Bund emerged in this particular place. Attempting to justify her terminology, she points out that Jews at the start of the 19th century differentiated Lithuania and White Russia but that over the course of that century, the terms became interchangeable and that the word Lithuania was used to designate the entire northwestern region. Levin, although she uses the term 'White Russia' finds no specificities in Belorussia and always links it with Lithuania. She only takes Lithuania into consideration as the place of birth and growth of the Jewish socialist movement and takes no interest in Belorussian nationalism of the time. She remains one of the only authors to have attempted to justify her terminology.

Jonathan Frankel for his part looks at Jewish political responses to the crisis they underwent in the early 1880s.[60] His book is an overview of these different responses (socialist or Zionist political parties, emigration). Like Mendelsohn and Levin, Frankel only refers to White Russia in relation to the Bund. The term White Russia, always accompanied by its corollary Lithuania, is used to designate the whole northwestern region.

The monumental *Histoire Générale du Bund*[61] by Henri Minczeles situates the birth of the Bund in Lithuania and in Belorussia, adopting the traditional definition of the term Belorussia as a region of Russia. In this study, as in the previous ones, Belorussia is merely a backdrop and is not the topic of in-depth investigations by the author.

Aside from these general books or political monographs on the history of the Jews of Russia, Poland or in Lithuania, with their paucity of data on Belorussia, a handful of works deal specifically with the history of Belorussian Jewry.

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[58] Menhelsohn, Ezra, *Class Struggle in the Pale. The formative years of the Jewish Worker's Movement in Tsarist Russia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 180 p.

[59] Levin, Nora, *While Messiah Tarried. Jewish socialist Movements 1871-1917,* New York, Schocken Books, 1977, p.223.

[60] Frankel, Jonathan, *Prophecy and Politics. Socialism, Nationalism and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917,* Cambridge-London-NewYork-Melbourne-Sydney, Cambridge University Press, 1981, 686 p.

[61] Minczeles, Henri, *Histoire générale du Bund. Un mouvement révolutionnaire juif*, Paris, Editions Austral, 1995, 526 p

Vera Rich conducted a literary investigation of Jewish themes and characters in Belorussian texts in the post-Stalinistic period.[62] In the first chapter, she raises the difficult issue of the definition of Belorussia in the 19th century since no official State statute existed and Belorusssia presented no religious unity (the Belorussians were Orthodox, Catholic or Uniates). Belorussianity hence arose from a set of shared traditions and the Belorussian language. Through contacts with other nations, the Belorussians encountered other traditions. In their contacts with Jews, they were faced with other religious observances such as *Kashrut* or the Jewish holidays. These differences in beliefs and religious observances prevented the Jews from being part of the Belorussian tradition. The other obstacle was that of the language, an obstacle designed to preserve traditions within each community, which made Russian the language of mediation. In the remaining chapters, Vera Rich analyzes the ways in which Jewish characters were used and treated by Belorussian authors in various contexts: the pre-revolutionary era, the revolution of 1905 and 1917. Vera Rich's study constitutes a major contribution to the cultural history of Belorussian Jewry. However it would be worthwhile to extend this study to the pre-revolutionary period and Stalinistic era Belorussian literature to complete the picture. Vera Rich should be complimented for not avoiding the issue of the definition of Belorussia in the 19th century and to have directly dealt with the complex relationships between Jews, Russians and Belorussians.

There is a second work on the history of the Belorussian Jews in English, a monograph by David Fishman dealing with the Jews of Shklov.[63] This work belongs more to the field of cultural history since Fishman is interested in the emergence of Shklov as a center of rabbinical study and later as a center of emancipation and its expansion throughout the Jewish world. This town was one of the first centers of the Jewish enlightenment in Russia. Fishman also provides considerations on Jewish Belorussia. He situates the beginnings of the regional council of Belorussia (*vaad medinat rusiya*) in the seventeenth century and sketches the specificities of this autonomous area of Russia, on the fringes of Lithuania and Russia. He also stresses the fact that Belorussia was the birthplace of the struggle between the Hassidim and their opponents. He thus provides information on the political and cultural autonomy of the Belorussian Jews.

Finally, the Anglo-Saxon historian who has studied the Belorussian Jews most extensively is John D. Klier.[64] His thesis, translated and published recently in Russian, deals with the integration of the Jewish population annexed during the three partitions of Poland by the Russian Empire[65]. Klier examines the vacillations of

[62] Title of part two of the book: Rich, Vera, *The Image of the Jew in Soviet Literature. The Post-Stalin Period,* New York, Ktav Publishing House, 1984, pp.99-185.

[63] Fishman, David E., *Russia's first modern Jews. The Jews of Shklov*, New York: London, New York University Press, 1995, 195 p

[64] Klier, John Doyle, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question*, *1855-1881*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 534 p.; idem, *Russia Gathers her Jews 1772-1825. The origins of the Jewish Question in Russia* , Dekalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1986, 236 p. Klier, J.D., Lambroza, S. (ed.), *Pogroms: anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 393 p.

[65] Klier, J.D., *Rossiia sobiraet svoikh evreev* (Russia gathers its Jews), Moscou-Jerusalem, Mosty Kultury-Gesharim, 2000, 351 p

the Russian government as regards a new issue: the Jewish question. Drawing on the works of Gessen and recent work by a Belorussian historian, he traces step by step the formulation of Russian legislation concerning the Jews and the emergence of the Jewish question in Russia. Because Jewish policy was mainly tested on the Belorussian Jews, who became Russian in 1772, Klier sheds light the specificities of this community and its reactions to its new ruler. In this way he depicts the remarkable political acumen of the Belorussian Jews, who via representatives and delegates sent to Saint-Petersburg, were able to defend their privileges and avoid the promulgation of certain discriminatory measures. Through this study, it is clear that these twenty years of integration into the Russian Empire marked the Jewish community of Belorussia and gave it a different history and awareness than that of the communities of Lithuania, the Ukraine or Poland.

Conclusion

This panorama of Russian, Soviet and Western historiography clearly shows that the Belorussian Jews have not elicited a genuine interest on the part of most historians. This community has not found its place in the history of Russian Jewry – at best it is characterized as the first subjects of the Russian Empire and the forerunners of the Russian *Haskalah*, and at worst it is combined with the Lithuanian Jews or submerged in the vast destiny of Russian Jews. In addition, historians who have written on the Belorussian Jews, like Gessen or Klier, have provided an unsatisfactory and vague definition of Jewish Belorussia in the 19th century. The latter only appears to have an autonomous existence from 1772 to the beginning of the 19th century, and then vanishes from histories of Russian Jews. Between the silence of most historians and the proclamation of a Jewish Belorussian identity by contemporary Belorussian historians, there is a need to deconstruct two conflicting myths: first, the homogeneity of the Russian Jews, and second the a-priori existence of a Jewish Belorussian community, in order, in the final analysis, to define this historical object and to differentiate reality from representations.

Claire Le Foll